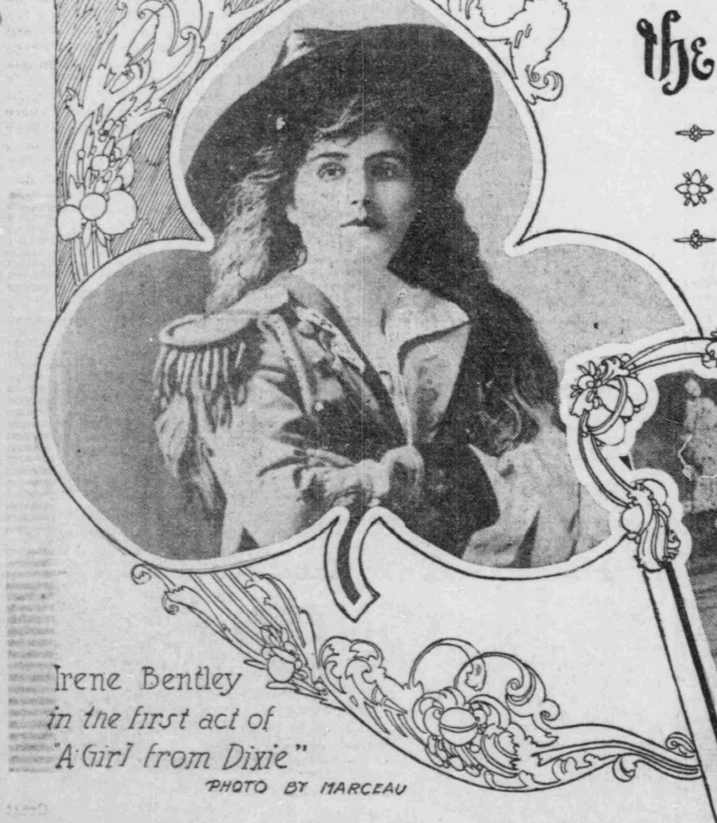
A Freehand Talk about the Stage and Stage Folk

by Matthew White Jr.



Irene Bentley in the first act of "A Girl from Dixie"
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Anna Held as she appears in the last act of "Mlle. Napoleon"
PHOTO. BY REUTLINGER

A Scene in the last Act of "A Girl from Dixie"
PHOTO. BY BYRON

Bertha Galland starring in "Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall"
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May Robson who takes the part of Queen Elizabeth
PHOTO. BY BURR McINTOSH

William H. Lewers who is Sir John Manners in "Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall"
PHOTO. BY SCHLOSS

Anna Held and Henry Bergman in the first act of "Mlle Napoleon"
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WILLIAMS.

"The Girl From Dixie" Easily at the Head of the Provincial Performances That Are Annoying Gotham—Irene Bentley Working Hard to Put Life Into Mr. Smith's Lines—The Big Bark of a Small Dog Best Feature of the Play—Anna Held's New Piece.

By MATTHEW WHITE, JR.

New York, Dec. 26.

IN comic opera the composer gets all the glory, and in musical comedy it falls to the librettist, so I am never going to write another comic opera."

So said Harry B. Smith to a newspaper man in 1899. That he has not stuck to his resolution all playgoers must know, although shortly after that he did turn out "Liberty Bells," with his name alone under the title. And now he may enjoy to the full all the responsibility for "A Girl from Dixie," which has come to the footlights in the same half-orphan fashion, with the music credited to various sponsors on a back page of the house bill.

Really, from the amount of ingenuity displayed in devising situations and business for this affair, one might suppose Mr. Smith wrote it during his callow days in Chicago, when he was bill clerk in a wholesale drug store, with secret aspirations for the stage.

"A Girl From Dixie."

Of all provincial shows that have ever visited Broadway, this one can easily rank in the lead. I do not wonder that it collapsed on the road. How it ever found an angel to bring it into New York is the marvel. Probably he wouldn't have turned up had not Jessie Millward fallen down in "A Clean Slate" and so supplied open time to be filled in some way at the Madison Square.

You can imagine what the major part of the humor must be like when an audience eagerly seizes on a big bark connected with a small dog on which to expend its merriment.

Although neither featured nor starred so far as the types are concerned, Irene Bentley is the main prop of this show. I used to think she was pretty and had a pleasing voice when I saw her in "The Wild Rose" summer before last, but in "A Girl from Dixie" she works so tirelessly that hard lines have crept into her face, and her tones have grown raspy from trying to make Mr. Smith's lines score.

Press Agent's Tip.

It was intimated by the press agent that the piece was written about Miss Bentley's own family history. She comes from Baltimore, and has almost succeeded in tracing her ancestry back to the Calverts, and it is a maiden of this name she impersonates in "A Girl from Dixie." Her brother Wilmer is with her in the piece, a jolly lad, whose frank enjoyment in his labors is almost worth sitting through the show to see.

The leading male part falls to Ferdinand Gottschalk, who, for the past few seasons, ever since "The Climbers," in fact, has been in Amelia Bingham's company.

He is a Londoner by birth, and is really a very versatile fellow, aside from what he has accomplished as an actor. His parents were lovers of art, and from them he inherited an artistic temperament, which made him a painter, a player upon various instruments, a composer of some ability, as well as a writer of plays.

Gottschalk's Career.

In his early twenties he formed among his young associates in the Hampstead region of London an amateur dramatic club. He acted character and eccentric parts in the plays they produced to such good purpose that the late Rosina Vokes heard of his fame and engaged him for her next American tour. He remained with Miss Vokes until her retirement, and at her last performance in Washington she called him out from the wings and insisted that he share with her the favor of the public.

Well, after that Mr. Gottschalk wandered about, seeking a position, which was not easy for one of his short stature to obtain. In the course of his trampings he appeared at the office of Daniel Frohman, who was then at the old Lyceum in Fourth Avenue. He had scarcely opened his mouth before Mr. Frohman burst out with:

"Lord Tweenwayes to the life—the face, the figure, the very expression. Sit down and sign this contract."

His Success in "The Amazons."

It seems that Mr. Frohman had been holding Pinero's eccentric comedy, "The Amazons," for months because he could not find a suitable person to play in it the chief male comedy role, which requires a person just of Gottschalk's build.

His success in the part was pronounced, and he was at once signed as a regular member of the stock company, with which he continued to be identified when it was transferred to Daly's, where he impersonated the timid young lord in "The Maneuvers of Jane," pulling to pieces a straw hat at every performance.

At the Garrick meantime, he had been the pompous musician in "Never Again." In "The Climbers," it will be remembered, he was the rich young noodle, pairing off with Madge Carr Cooke, now starring in "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch."

Anna Held's New Piece.

The thing that surprised me most in Anna Held's new vehicle, "Mam'selle Napoleon," was that Miss Held herself had so little to do. Nevertheless, this did not detract to my mind from the show furnishing me with about the same amount of entertainment I received from its next door neighbor, "Winsome Winnie." In fact, it is built on exactly the same music hall plan—permitting a man to stroll in at almost any time and find something going on to his liking, which can be enjoyed irrespective of "before and after."

Miss Held was imported from Paris something less than ten years ago to sing, "Won't You Come and Play Wiz Me," between the acts of the revived "Parlor Match," with Evans and Hoey, at the Herald Square.

Then, in October, 1897, Oscar Hammerstein engaged her to reopen the theater part of his Olympia under its new name, the Lyric, in "La Poupee" ("The Doll"). Well, although Miss Held made a very good impression, she didn't succeed in keeping the house open long under its new appellation. In fact, it was not until two years later, when she appeared at the Manhattan in "Papa's Wife," that she demonstrated her right to have her name printed at the top of the bill in big type.

Past Successes.

Henry Bergman, now the villain in "Mam'selle Napoleon," was with her then as Papa, and Papa's son was Henry Woodruff, while Charles A. Bigelow (now heading "An English Daisy" cast) heaped to himself honors as chief comedian. This play (Americanized book by the irrepressible Harry B. Smith, music by De Koven) lasted her two years. Then she came forward at the Casino in "The Little Duchess," by the same men. That the piece lasted her two seasons more is equivalent to saying that it caught on with the same grip as its predecessor.

Whether "Mam'selle Napoleon" will prove to possess equal staying powers is doubtful. Its New York run terminates on January 16, making the shortest metropolitan term Miss Held has ever played. However, the lady may take this as a compliment, if she likes, by recalling the fact that there is less of her in the new piece than in either of the other two vehicles in which she has starred.

Miss Held's early days here were responsible for some amusing misstatements in the press. When, in the summer of 1896, she was announced to come to New York in "A Parlor Match," the "Herald" gave out this information concerning her:

"Miss Anna Held is an English woman, who, until a year ago last February, was practically unknown, although she had been appearing for some time at the London music halls. About the date mentioned she secured an engagement in Paris, and her success there was phenomenal." Yet the same paper, in its review of "Papa's Wife," on November 14, 1899, took occasion to remark that Miss Held "displayed a mastery of English that was unlooked for."

About the same period there were wiseacres in stage affairs who asserted that Miss Held was of Polish extraction; that her birthplace was the crowded quarter of New York's ghetto, and that she first saw the wrong side of the curtain in a Bowery concert hall.

Learned English Here.

The substratum of truth in the foregoing appears to be that her parents were natives of Warsaw, and that while on a visit to Paris the daughter Anna was born. She was obliged to chat with reporters through an interpreter on her arrival here in 1896, and learned all her English in the three years between that time and her debut in "Papa's Wife."

Joseph W. Herbert, chief comedian in "Mam'selle Napoleon," and adapter of the book, was the French dancing master with Miss Held in "The Little Duchess." He is English by birth, came to this country when thirteen, and while attending the Jesuit College in Chicago became a member of the Chicago Church Choir Company.

This was the period following the "Pinafore" craze, and the troupe presented the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas, acting as chorus with professionals for principals. When "Iolanthe" was billed the Lord Chancellor failed to turn up. Herbert was pressed into service to take his place, and his life work was sealed from that hour.

Herbert as Koko.

After that he was Koko in "The Mikado," in the original production of De Koven & Smith's "Rob Roy" at the Herald Square, the restless Auguste in the "Girl From Paris" at the same theater, and for two seasons supported Lillian Russell in her starring days at the Knickerbocker.

As to Herbert's playwriting, he began by writing verses, and finally turned out "After the Ball" and "The Birth of Venus," both of which he succeeded in having produced. His first real hit in this line, however, was made with a burlesque on the Du Maurier play, called "Thrilby," which ran nearly a whole summer at the Garrick.

Miss Held's tenor, Frank Rushworth, is also an Englishman, and likewise came to this country when quite young and settled in Chicago, and, again like Herbert, sang in church choirs there. He made his stage debut in the Windy City in 1897, at the Schiller, in "The Black Hussar," then came to New York and was in Miss Held's company when she sang "La Poupee." After that he joined Augustin Daly's musical company as Gaston in "The Circus Girl," and later was with Alice Neilsen in "The Fortune Teller" at the Casino.

A Popular Disease.

Abnormal cranial development is a disease that seems to attack the player with more frequency than any other one class, although I should not be surprised if this should be a "seem" with a big S. There are literally folk I wot of who have the affliction in pretty sizable quantity. But there is hope that the thing will die out among the players. Certainly, it appears to bring its own punishment along with it.

Take Bertha Galland, for example. She came to New York as leading woman for Hackett, a perfectly unknown quantity, in 1903. In "The Pride of Jennico" she received equally good notices with the star, and at once became so puffed up with pride and self-consequence that it was actually reported she refused to share curtain calls with anyone save Mr. Hackett himself.

Certain it is that in a year's time she was placed at the head of a company of her own and made a miserable failure of it in the poetic drama, "The Forest Lovers."

The company disbanded in the middle of the season, and Miss Galland, with a heavy heart, retired into private life for a time. Then Dan Frohman sent her out on the road at the head of "Notre Dame," in the role created at Daly's by Hilda Spong, but this was not to the young woman's liking and once more the actress who had shone so resplendently in "The Pride of Jennico" left the boards.

Back Again to the Boards.

Now she is back on them again, and in a part that is better suited to her than any she has had since that Marie Ottilie, in the Egerton Castle play, brought her into prominence with a bound. To be sure, "Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall," as a drama, rather goes to pieces after the first half, but Miss Galland has good opportunity throughout, and the excellence of the company helps to cover some of the defects of the play.

Nevertheless, I confess frankly I was disappointed in May Robson's Queen Elizabeth, to which I had been looking forward with considerable interest. In some way she seemed to be afraid of the part, neglected to throw herself into it with the usual abandonment. Perhaps she has become so accustomed to doing the soubrette act and the comic serving maid that the robes of royalty awed her into a sort of stiffness.

May Robson's Queen.

Last winter she was the nouveau riche mother, struggling with French, in "The Billionaire." Her first appearance in musical comedy was some three years ago as the mother of Jimmy Powers in "The Messenger Boy." She told me at the time that she was delighted with musical work, so I fancied she would not soon desert it, but doubtless the temptation to be a queen once in a way was too strong to be resisted. The only other occasion I can recall when her character dominated the scene was the winter she served as Sapolio at Weber & Fields' in their burlesque of "Sapho."

In private life Miss Robson is Mrs. Dr. Brown, and her son, a six-footer, is the Edward Gore, now enacting David, the great painter, in "Mam'selle Napoleon." He used to be one of the double sextet in "Florodora," and after that the Governor of Villaya in "The Toreador," with Francis Wilson.

The leading man in "Dorothy Vernon," William Lewers, has changed his characteristics more completely than almost any actor that has lately come under my knowledge. I recall him first as being rather of the light-waisted order in a minor role with Annie Russell in "Miss Hobbs," then last season he blossomed out as the manliest of the manly soldiers with Julia Marlowe in "The Cavalier."

As Sir John Manners, with Miss Galland, he is clear cut and satisfying, both to the eye and the intelligence, and should be able without very much trouble to command work throughout the season in New York.

Lewers was born in Honolulu, and comes of non-theatrical folk. He went to school in Boston, and his first idea was to be a painter. Then, in 1884, he appeared with Irving and Terry in "Much Ado About Nothing." After that he attended the Sargent School of Acting for a winter, next procured an engagement with Charles Frohman for "Gloriana," and finally drifted out to the Pacific side of the continent again, and appeared with the Frawley stock, which he left to study medicine.

From Journalism to the Stage.

George Le Soir, the jester in Miss Galland's play, did yeoman's service in Augustin Daly's company during the latter part of that famous manager's career. Perhaps most playgoers will remember him best as the vengeful Pietro of the gypsy band in "A Runaway Girl," but previous to that he had been the Commissionaire in "The Circus Girl," the Chinaman in "The Geisha," Fabian in "Twelfth Night," and Vincentio in "Taming of the Shrew," to mention only some of the more prominent of the parts he filled.

It was while he was associate editor of the "Theater Magazine" that he met Mr. Daly, and when that publication (which had no connection with the present "Theater") went the way of the majority of experiments in journalism, Mr. Daly invited the young man to take charge of his dramatic library. From this he stepped to stage management, and so back to the stage itself, for in his early days he had been busy on the boards, doing all sorts of things, from enacting coons, fishwomen, and barkeepers to serving as property boy and looking after the baggage.

CYCLONE CELLARS

NO MORE will the Illinois farmers poke fun at Kansas and Nebraska on account of the custom of those States to provide themselves with cyclone cellars.

The farmers of Bureau county, in several localities at least, have been busy all fall building the most modern structure of this kind on record. The fury of the storms that visited this locality last summer is still fresh in the minds of everybody, and some of the farmers are picking up cyclone drift yet.

Not long ago a school teacher at Davis Junction, fearing for the safety of her flock of pupils, had one of these handy contrivances built, the farmer directors being easy to convince that the thing was needed, and every now and then the teacher has a cyclone drill, in which the whole school suddenly leave the school and take to the adjoining hole in the ground.—Chicago Record-Herald.

His Patience Tested.

THE following story is being told in Rockville, Md., on an old farmer, who has lived in the neighborhood for many years. The old man had reached the stage where it was necessary to comb his hair with a towel, and, meandering into a Rockville drug store, he said:

"Looky here, Mixer, yew indooced me tew blow in a dollar fer a bottle uv yore hair renooer a couple uv weeks ergo, and it ain't done eny good nohow."

"That's strange," replied the druggist. "I never knew it to fail before. But one bottle is hardly a fair trial."

"Mebby it ain't," said the old man. "Yew can gimme a nuther bottle, but if that don't bring th' answer I'll never drink any more uv the pesky stuff, b'gosh."

A BORN POLITICIAN

SENATOR BLACKBURN says that a Kentuckian desirous of ascertaining the natural tendencies of his offspring, a boy of eight years, bethought himself of the following plan:

He placed upon a table a Bible, a dollar, and a bottle of whisky. "If," said the Kentuckian to his wife, "the boy takes the Bible it will show that he is cut out to be a preacher; if he takes the dollar, then he will be a business man; if he takes the whisky we must watch him carefully—he may go wrong."

The man and his wife then withdrew and observed the boy from another room. After wandering about for a while the youngest went to the table and carefully examined the articles thereon. He put the dollar in his pocket, took a swig from the bottle of whisky, and, placing the Bible under his arm, marched away.

"Sarah," said the man, turning to his wife, "I'm sorry to say that the boy is going to be a politician!"

English as She Is Wrote.

A SPRINGFIELD school teacher, says the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch," received the following note from the mother of one of her pupils recently: "Dear Mis, You writ me about whipping Sammy. I herby give you permission to beet him up eny time it is necessary to learn him lessens. He is juste like his father—you have to learn him with a clubb. Pound noledge into him. I want him to git it, and don't pay no atenshun to what his father says, I'll handle 'him.'"